A study of first-time heart attack patients at a Minneapolis hospital found that only 10 percent of them had been receiving preventive treatments such as drugs to lower cholesterol, reduce blood pressure or prevent clots. The University of Minnesota researchers studied 815 patients at Abbot Northern Hospital between 2007 and 2010 and presented their research [1] at the American Heart Association meeting in Chicago.

University cardiologist and lead researcher Dr. Jay Cohn says it’s not clear why the stricken patients hadn’t been on medication, but other studies have shown a majority of heart attacks occur in people with normal blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

“Why would a person without any warning signs be on prescription drugs?” wonders Dr. Ross. “I am certainly a big believer in preventive measures against heart disease, especially the use of cholesterol- and BP-lowering drugs in people whose markers are elevated. But this study seems to require a crystal-ball—the ‘retrospectroscope.’”

Still, Dr. Cohn told [1] the Star Tribune that “If we could have gotten these individuals on proper medication, I’m confident that the majority of these first time heart attacks wouldn’t have happened.” But 10 percent of the patients in the study suffered a heart attack in spite of taking drugs, so he says it’s clear they’re not 100 percent effective.

What really bothers Dr. Ross is another finding from the study: Among patients with a history of heart attacks, only 30 to 50 percent of them were taking medications when they had a recurrence. “Patients with a history of heart disease need to be vigilant about their health and most should at least be on aspirin, lipid-lowering agents, and perhaps a blood-pressure drug as well. Of course, anyone reading this needs to consult their own physician.”

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